Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current
scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

1.982
A2N955
cop2

U. S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE
NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LIBRARY

For exchange of information on nutrition programs and activities

NUTRITION PROGRAM NEWS

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D. C.

MAY-JUNE, 1965

JUL 14 1965
CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS

NUTRITION AND THE WAR ON POVERTY

American Home Economics Association Workshop—Working With Low-Income Families

MARY M. HILL, ED.D., NUTRITIONIST, CONSUMER AND FOOD ECONOMICS RESEARCH DIVISION

In response to President Johnson's request that all forces be mobilized to eradicate poverty, the American Home Economics Association sponsored a 1965 workshop on working with families in the poverty group.

From March 15-19, 200 home economists gathered at the College of Continuing Education, University of Chicago. They considered:

1. The role of home economists in raising the levels of living of low-income families.

2. How to motivate home economists across the nation to assume this role and to accept the challenges presented by the "Poverty" program.

The workshop provided an opportunity for home economists to:

1. Observe some members of the poverty group—in clinic situations or in their homes.
2. Obtain specific information about these people.
3. Learn of the many and varied resources available.
4. Plan activities to mobilize home economists, nationwide, to accept the challenge of poverty.

The participants were concerned with all areas of family living. We will limit our report of this workshop to the implications for nutrition programs geared to the needs of the poverty group.

CULTURE OF THE POVERTY GROUP

Some families have lived for generations in poverty. They represent a culture that many classroom teachers, home economists, and other workers do not fully understand. As a result, efforts to work with these families have, in many instances, proved disappointing. Merely increasing income is no assurance that levels of living will be raised. Most of the speakers at the workshop presented information to help home economists add depth to their understanding of this group.

All low-income families are not representative of the culture of the poverty group, of course. Some have maintained higher levels of living in the past, but no longer have enough money to maintain the levels consistent with their values. What these families need is a source of increased income—a job or, in the case of the elderly, funds to supplement their income. With a little help, they will raise their own level of living.

Characteristics

Families living in poverty seldom have much privacy. Little of whatever concerns the family escapes the children. Children grow up fast and live fast; they function as adults by age 13. Their concepts of life are vastly different from those of the middle-class boy or girl. Physical aggression and the expression of emotion are both normal and expected.

Parents believe physical whippings are the best means of training. Children soon learn to take beatings without fear. At the same time, they live in the midst of fear, worry, and anxiety. Fear of starvation and eviction are most pressing.

Health

According to the National Health Survey, the poor are more susceptible to disease than people with higher incomes. Among the poor, the very young and the very old have the greatest health problems. For example, 51 percent of the people with incomes of less than $2,000 have one or more chronic health conditions, compared with 43 percent of those with incomes over $10,000. Health problems of young mothers—particularly teenage mothers—and young children often are complicated by poor nutrition.

Education

Children of poverty often have a wonderful zest and expressiveness. Unless middle-class teachers are both understanding and skillful, children lose this zest when their behavior stuns and shocks others. They soon lose confidence in their own ability. Parents set a poor example because they lack the drive characteristic of middle-class parents.

Children are soon conscious of their subordinate place in society. This results in weakening of self-esteem, self-depreciation, and self-contempt hidden under a great mass of hostilities. The schools available are geared to middle-class objectives, values, aspirations. The result—dropouts.

Consumer behavior

The poor pay more for consumer goods because discount houses and supermarkets are not often located near their homes. They have no opportunity to make a large number of choices. And they frequently make bad choices. They pay more when borrowing money, but money is less available to them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HOME ECONOMISTS

It is essential that we home economists abandon middle group notions and values and accept these people as they are. We must study what they are and what they do; we must find what needs to be improved and what needs to be preserved. This cannot be accomplished without understanding the basic attitudes and cultural habits of the group. Methods and techniques must be adjusted to work with the poor realistically.

For example, in dealing with nutrition and food habits, we must start with the foods the people eat. By suggesting additional foods, one at a time, if necessary, that will round out the basic diet, they can approach nutritional adequacy. Care must be taken not to limit these families to middle-class food choices. Beans, greens, and cornbread may not be the best fare nutritionally, but this combination can be used as a base upon which to build. There is no advantage in suggesting the substitution of a complete menu. Start by encouraging the addition of milk; later, eggs or meat can be added.

It is so easy to confuse status value with nutritional value and consequently to attempt to impose our middle-class choices on these people. To imply that beans, greens, and cornbread are not good when wisely combined with other foods is an example of emphasizing status values.

If we are to deal realistically with the poor, our suggestions and recommendations must be within their money limitations. Demonstrations, for example, should be of economical foods or food combinations. Furthermore, demonstrations should be geared to the equipment found in the homes. A demonstration of oven cookery is a waste of time for homemakers who either have no ovens or cannot afford the cost of fuel to operate them.

Emphasis should be placed on the need for a meal in the morning. Hungry children get restless, then sleepy; consequently they are more difficult to teach. Dr. Allison Davis, one of the workshop speakers, said, "A school breakfast can teach a hungry child."

In addition to working directly with low-income families in school or community programs, nutritionists and workers in allied professions may be local consultants in the planning and operation of community action programs co-sponsored by the Office of Economic Opportunity. One such program is Project Head Start. Head Start is designed to give children of limited opportunity a chance to get ready for school. The Head Start program will provide nourishing food and new learning experiences. Because a well-nourished child has the best chance, feeding is important.

Project Head Start has a nutrition consultant at the National level. She will suggest guidelines for planners and operators of community programs. Children attending a Head Start Center for as much as a half-day should be given food at snack time as well as at lunch time. Some children will also need breakfast.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Resources for raising the levels of living of the low-income group are greater than they have ever been before. The Office of Economic Opportunity draws on the established programs and competencies of the Federal Departments as it provides funds and leadership for the local community action programs.

Nutrition

Improving the nutrition of the poor requires both material and human resources. First, a variety of foods must be made available that will supply the necessary nutrients and food energy. Availability of food is no assurance that nutritional health will be improved. The people must be motivated to eat the available food and to choose combinations that will meet their needs for nutrients and food energy. In other words, nutrition education must go hand in hand with food distribution.

Food distribution programs

The United States Department of Agriculture makes a significant contribution to the nutritional health of the poor in the United States and abroad. Since the 1930's, surplus foods have been distributed to the needy through various programs. Currently, food is distributed:

1. Directly to needy families in the United States through State distribution agencies.

2. Through school lunch and other non-profit group feeding programs.

3. Abroad through the various programs of the Agency for International Development.

Since mid-1961, a Food Stamp Program has been in operation on a pilot basis in eight selected areas. This program will be expanded to all areas of the country desiring it. One of the objectives is to help needy families achieve a more adequate diet than might be possible by supplementing their usual diet with only the foods that happen to be in surplus. Eligibility to participate in the Food Stamp Program is related to State welfare standards.

The Food Stamp Program is based on studies of food expenditures and the amounts of money that low-income families could normally be expected to spend for food. Each month participating families exchange these amounts of money for coupons of higher monetary value. Coupons may be spent for any food, with the exception of a few imported items, at any retail store approved to accept such coupons. The retailer redeems the coupons through commercial banks.

Adapting Federal programs to meet specific needs. Cooperative programs among Federal and State agencies implement the provision and distribution of resources to meet specific needs of local agency programs.

One good example of this is the cooperative work done by the Division of Health Services, Children's Bureau, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the Food Distribution Division, Consumer and Marketing Service, Department of Agriculture, on improving the nutritional health of needy expectant and lactating women.

After several conferences at the Federal level, a joint statement was prepared. It covers:

1. The significance of the food distribution programs in meeting the nutrient and food energy needs of expectant and lactating mothers.

2. The need for interagency cooperation in promoting and extending the programs.

3. The need for adaptation of the programs to meet the particular needs of the people they reach.

4. The necessity for developing effective educational approaches.

The statement and a packet of background materials were sent to counterparts in regions and States. Reports to date show this has generated:

1. Increased interagency planning and exchange of information at State and local levels.

2. Increased efforts for educating recipients in the use of donated foods.

3. Greater emphasis on helping food stamp recipients make better food choices as they purchase the family food supply.

Nutrition education. Experience with food distribution programs indicates that the most effective education programs are those developed locally. Good programs result when workers from health and welfare, extension, schools, and other agencies involved with recipient families get together and plan to help homemakers meet the needs and wants of their families.

The reports from many schools, for example, on the effect of food distribution programs indicate that children of families who have been using the extra food for a time have improved attendance records, are more alert, and consequently achieve more academically.

Existing community programs. Many existing community programs were described at the workshop in Chicago. For example, a program in operation 23 years is handled through the home economics department of the Dallas, Tex., school system for residents of housing projects. This program provides help in homemaking—money management, housekeeping skills, food selection and preparation, purchasing, and the like.

The intent of the Economic Opportunity Act is to include, expand, and coordinate current community programs with new ones that the new funds make possible.

Training and retraining. The recent vocational education and economic opportunity legislation provides funds for training or retraining both young and old. This training can be a means of really involving the poor by preparing them to holds jobs in programs designed to raise levels of living.

Several speakers at the workshop stressed the need to involve the poverty group in any and all phases of community programs—from planning through operation.

SPRINGBOARDS FOR ACTION

At the AHEA Workshop we learned a great deal about the poverty group from the excellent speakers representing many disciplines and many professional groups or agencies. There is a job of vast proportions to be done and nutritionists and workers in allied professions have an important role to play. We also got some clues on how we might proceed.

Regional, State, or local meetings

The first step will be mobilizing the professional force to supply consultant help in foods and nutrition to the planners of community action programs. Consultants also will alert planners to the many functioning programs that can be utilized.

Workshops and conferences at the regional, State, and local levels will provide an opportunity for professionals to get the necessary background information and become aware of the framework of disciplines within which they must work. Then they can make specific plans for using material and human resources to best advantage in their communities.

Attention to specific problems

We learned that some of the very young and the very old have acute health problems. In many instances these are complicated by inadequate nutrition. These problems have received the attention of food and nutrition workers in many communities. The surface has been barely scratched, however.

Concerted effort, nationwide, is needed to:

1. Make the necessary food available to the elderly and the very young—groups which simply are not getting enough food to supply either the necessary nutrients or food energy.

2. Motivate these groups to accept and enjoy a better selection of food combinations.

Day care centers, Head Start projects, and the like. Many new day care programs are being designed for young children—particularly from low-income families. Children will assemble in a variety of facilities from a few to many hours a day. Some attend while mother works. Others, already culturally deprived, are to be prepared for school experiences. Provision must be made for group feeding—often by someone who has little knowledge of nutrition and little money to spend.

Food and nutrition workers at State or regional levels might develop standards of food selection, preparation and service, and food sanitation for these facilities.

Portable meals. In many communities, nutrition workers have discovered that elderly people living alone need help in getting desirable amounts and kinds of food. Operating programs provide home-delivered meals to these people, usually at a nominal cost. Some communities also provide meals for elderly people in Senior Citizen Centers.

Food and nutrition workers could consider the possibility of providing similar services to eligible elderly persons in many more communities.

Orientation of workers for specific jobs

Some nutritionists and workers in allied professions who have the necessary food and nutrition background already work with families in the poverty group. These experienced workers can be most helpful in orienting others.

Most nutrition workers, however, will not have the opportunity to work directly with families who need help. First, there are not enough nutrition workers to get this job done. Secondly, there is a limit to the number of professional workers that should have access to homes.

Professionals with food and nutrition background should decide what is most important for these people to know and to do about food. In orientation sessions with professionals of other disciplines who do work directly with families, nutrition workers can communicate good food concepts. Jointly, they can devise ways for motivating families to make better food choices and to use food money to best advantage.

IN CONCLUSION

One idea was reiterated throughout the workshop. The "have nots" will have to be included every step of the way. The solution to this national problem of poverty is not a simple one—certainly not so simple as the "haves" conducting a program for the "have nots."

This means that those providing leadership must have great breadth and depth of understanding of the poverty group—their problems, objectives, and cultural habits. Leaders must be committed to the goals of the program and ready to try innovations of all sorts as the need arises.

On the other hand, we have never before had the variety and quantity of services available as we have today to help these people. It is essential that all resources both material and human be put to work immediately to alleviate deprivation among people now and to prevent it for future generations.

Consumer and Food Economics Research Division, Agricultural Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, in consultation with the Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education. (Printing approved by the Bureau of the Budget, June 11, 1963.)